"I didn't want to be known as a snitch":
Using PAR to explore bullying in a private day and boarding school

Corresponding author:
Niamh O'Brien
Research Fellow
Faculty of Health Social Care and Education
Anglia Ruskin University

Abstract

Bullying research in secondary schools is plentiful in the literature but in the context of private day and boarding schools research is limited. This study used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework embedded in the philosophy of social constructionism to add to the knowledge in this field.

PAR is quite distinct from traditional research because it includes participants collaboratively in the research process. To this end a group of students in a private day and boarding school were recruited and trained in research methods. We worked together to answer the main research question: **What do young people in this private day and boarding school view as the core issue of bullying in the school and how do they want to address this?**

This study followed three distinct cycles of PAR through inquiry, action and reflection. Cycle one investigated the bullying definition used by the school in terms of how it is understood from the viewpoint of students, teachers, and parents. Cycle two investigated the concept of the 'snitch' and how safe students feel to report school bullying. Cycle three focussed on dissemination. Through these cycles, a school anti-bullying policy was devised and improvements to how the school deals with bullying implemented.

Key words: bullying, participatory action research, young people, private day and boarding school

Introduction

Research has shown that constant bullying can undermine the health and wellbeing of vulnerable young people (Smith, 1999; Morrison, 2002; Juvonen et al. 2003). Bullying is not a new phenomenon, as can be evidenced from classic literature and modern film (Carter and Spencer, 2006). More recently, bullying has been regarded as an important policy issue (Tarapdar and Kellett, 2011), apparent through anti-bullying initiatives, such as the Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA), the Beatbullying charity and the Kidscape charity (DfE, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to present the process of 3 distinct cycles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) used with a group of students in a private day and boarding school. This PAR approach enabled us to explore the bullying issues in the school and make recommendations for change resulting in a student-led anti-bullying strategy for the school. It illustrates how young people can get involved as co-researchers when exploring issues of importance to them. I begin this paper by exploring bullying definitions and discussing the literature in the context of private day and boarding schools before presenting the PAR process and conclusions.

Literature Review

Academic research into school bullying has developed rapidly since the 1970s with the work of Dan Olweus in Sweden marking the origins (James, 2010; Cuadrado-Gordillo, 2012). Despite this interest there is still no consensus regarding an agreed definition of bullying with debate continuing over where acceptable 'playground behaviour' ends and bullying begins (Carter and Spencer, 2006; Cowie and Jennifer, 2008). In the UK no robust national statistics exist for reported cases of bullying in schools and this, to a large extent, relates to the absence of an agreed definition of bullying (OFSTED, 2003; Cowie and Jennifer, 2008).

Defining bullying

Prevalent writers in the field of bullying research agree that in order for a bullying episode to have occurred the following characteristics need to be observed: aggressive behaviour, power imbalance and repetition (Olweus, 1995; Smith and Morita, 1999; Rigby, 2000).

Carlisle and Rofes (2007) suggest that many researchers regard bullying as a cluster of different behaviours under the theme 'aggression' with 'verbal aggression', 'physical aggression' and 'relational aggression' as subthemes. Writers such as Menesini et al. (2002), Oliver and Candappa, (2003), Naylor et al. (2006), and others concur with Carlisle and Rofes (2007). Despite these

concurrences, discrepancies have been noted between the behaviours that young people and adults associate with bullying (O'Brien, 2009). Craig at al. (2000), Menesini et al. (2002) and Sawyer et al. (2011) found that adults tend to react more to cases of physical aggression than to verbal and psychological aggression. Indeed findings from Sawyer et al. (2011) suggest that most parents regard physical bullying as the most serious form of bullying and some parents do not believe their child has been bullied unless a physical attack has occurred. Studies involving young people indicate that verbal abuse can be as serious as physical bullying (Lines, 1999; Oliver and Candappa, 2003; Naylor et al. 2006; Thompson and Gunter, 2008). Lines (1999) proposes that the significance is not in the meaning of the words, but rather the hurt the insult causes.

It has been argued that an imbalance of power is what separates 'bullying' from 'aggression' (Vreeman and Carol, 2007). Findings from Cheng et al. (2011) suggest both adults and young people perceive bullying as involving a power imbalance in terms of physical power and having "*powerful parents, being class activity leaders, or using the teacher's authority, to bully the positional inferior*" (p.232). Other studies have highlighted pupils' fear of attending school (Morrison, 2002; Juvonen et al. 2003; Ofsted, 2003; NCB, 2004; House of Commons, 2007) and Sullivan et al. (2004) propose that the reason victims of bullying do not report it is due to the power relationship between the bully and the bullied. In contrast, a Spanish study by Cuadrado-Gordillo (2012), found that 70% of participants did not perceive the bully as more powerful physically, psychologically or socially. In a study examining the impact of cyber-bullying on young people's mental health, O'Brien and Moules (2013) found that 87 young people (19.7%) reported that they had experienced cyberbullying and from that number 35 (41.5%) did not worry about it, indicating that they possibly did not perceive a power differential. Or maybe it was because when the bullying is online, some young people perceive the bully as less threatening because they are not face-to-face with the perpetrator.

Recent studies propound that repetition is not considered as a bullying variable by young people (Naylor et al. 2006; Cheng, 2011; Cuadrado-Gordillo, 2012). Adults, on the other hand view repetition as a characteristic of bullying (Naylor et al. 2006; Cheng, 2011). OFSTED researchers (2003) advise that there is often a difference in how bullying is conducted; it can be one-off or continual, but either way can be damaging. Lee (2006) debates whether or not repetition is a determinant of bullying and the impact this has on policies. He questions whether interjection should happen at the first intended act or once the act is continuously repeated and evidence gathered (Lee, 2006).

None of the research reviewed above considered bullying in private day and/or boarding schools so the study I am presenting set out to help close that gap through actively involving school students

in the research process and speaking to current students of the school to ascertain their viewpoint on bullying issues.

Bullying in private day and boarding schools

Bullying research in secondary schools is plentiful in the literature (for example Oliver and Candappa, 2003; Thompson and Gunter, 2007; Thompson and Smith, 2012), but in the context of private day and boarding schools research is limited (Neddam, 2004; Schaverien, 2004; Poynting and Donaldson, 2005). For the most part these studies have focussed on adults who were prior students at boarding school, so it could be argued that the experiences they encountered may have shifted overtime. Only one study by Morgan (2004), who collected data from maintained and independent boarding schools in England through questionnaires, focusses on current students. Morgan (2004 p.14) suggests concerns exist about how bullying in boarding school is different to bullying in day school because it's "…not as easy to escape from, as pupils are constantly enclosed in the school's environment." Indeed there is a need to speak to current students in private day and boarding schools to ascertain the bullying problems pertinent to now. Furthermore the few studies that have been carried out focus on the bullying experiences of boarding school boys but no reference is made to girls.

The methodology

The study I am presenting here used a PAR framework rooted in the philosophy of social constructionism to explore bullying in a private day and boarding school. Social constructionism recognises that knowledge is formed through human relationships rather than individuals on their own (Burr, 1995; Gergen and Gergen, 2008). Social constructionism is historically and culturally located and a similar study carried out in a different location could produce different findings (King and Horrocks, 2010).

PAR is carried out through a series of cycles involving planning, acting, observing and reflecting resulting in a revised plan of action (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). One of the main functions of PAR is the generation of knowledge through academic and local knowledge in order to provide oppressed people with the tools they need to make changes in their lives (Veale, 2005). Gergen and Gergen (2008) suggest that PAR expands on the ideas of social constructionism in three ways:

1. Researchers work collaboratively with research participants.

2. There is no separation of 'professional researcher' and the communities under study.

3. Sharing of knowledge is actively encouraged between the' professional' researcher and the 'co-researchers'.

In keeping with this ethos, 3 cycles of PAR took place throughout the project by the research team comprised of me as the adult researcher and students in the school as co-researchers. Cycle 1 explored the bullying definition used by the school and examined how satisfied or otherwise students, staff and parents were with how bullying is dealt with by the school. Cycle 2 explored the concept of 'the snitch' (or reporting bullying) as identified as an issue by the students themselves. Finally cycle 3 focussed on dissemination of the findings and implementation of the recommendations made. Underpinning this framework was the following research question: *What do young people in this private day and boarding school view as the core issue of bullying in the school and how do they want to address this?* Ethical approval was sought from the university research ethics committee at each data collection stage.

The Research Design – 3 cycles of PAR

Cycle 1

Six self-selecting students (3 boys and 3 girls) from year 8 to year 10 were recruited to the project as co-researchers. They called themselves Research for you (R4U) and had the slogan "*Researching for life without fear*".

Jones (2004) asserts that the child who is a researcher is engaged in real work and conditions of this work should be considered. It is consequently the responsibility of the adult researcher to ensure that the young people have the skills necessary to undertake the required work and are not exploited in any way so appropriate training for them is crucial (Jones, 2004; McLaughlin, 2006). To that end a training programme was delivered throughout the life of this project on a cyclical basis. Topics included data collection methods and tools, ethics, dissemination, report writing and others as the need arose. We used the research data generated at meetings, in training and in data collection activities to inform each stage of the process. This mirrored the planning, acting, observing and reflecting elements of PAR.

Questionnaires and a focus group were used to gather data for this first cycle which investigated how bullying is defined in the school. The bullying definition explored in this study is printed in the homeschool diaries of all students attending the school; this was used as a starting point:

> "*Bullying is when a student is repeatedly, and over a period of time, targeted by one or more students. Bullies intend to frighten, hurt, or threaten their victims. Bullying can take many forms, such as:*
> • *Teasing or name calling*
> • *Malicious gossip*
> • *Racial or sexual harassment*
> • *Isolating a student from a friendship group*

• Damaging or stealing property
• Hitting, punching and other physical abuse
Bullies can use a range of methods and these include face-to-face, mobile phones, email,
instant messaging or Internet message boards."
(Case study school, 2010).

Darbyshire et al. (2005) argue that researching children's experiences using multiple methods is valuable as it does not duplicate or replace already found data but offers further insights and understandings that might not always be possible through the use of a single data collection method. Pilot studies were carried out in cycles 1 and 2 prior to launching the methods and we used role play to rehearse interview questions.

In cycle 1 separate online questionnaires aimed at students, staff and parents were used. We encountered difficulties encouraging completion and the resulting numbers were 93 responses from students, 2 from staff and 2 from parents/carers. A focus group was carried out with students to explore further the responses provided on the student questionnaire and to provide students with the opportunity to speak to us as a research team about their own views and opinions on this topic.

A broad thematic analysis took place which enabled the team to work together and 'pull out' the core issues raised by the research participants. It also allowed us to determine the focus of the study for cycle two. Kidd and Kral (2005) consider this to be the 'action' in PAR projects, where the focus is more on how the inquiry and process will inform the action, rather than focussing specifically on research questions. In this respect the questions are not leading the study but the area of inquiry and the process is explored in order to ascertain whether the inquiry will inform action (Kidd and Kral, 2005). Therefore the project can begin with a number of research questions and as the project evolves these questions become less central being replaced by newer ones (Kidd and Kral, 2005). Exploring these questions is considered to be the research component of PAR (Kidd and Kral, 2005). Through using this approach, cycle 1 was exploratory in order to determine what it was that the young researchers wanted to investigate.

Cycle 2

The data from cycle 1 showed that, for the most part, students agreed with the bullying definition set by the school and were satisfied with how incidents of bullying are dealt with. However students exposed their fears about the consequences associated with reporting bullying or 'snitching':

"*I lost friends because of it*" (year 10 girl, boarder)
"*Teachers acted without telling us what they were going to do, ended up being*
excluded more" (year 13 girl, day student).
"*I didn't want to be known as a snitch*" (year 8 boy, day student)

In addition, students were unclear about what 'serious' and 'not serious' bullying signifies for them:

> "*Because it wasn't really serious one and if someone reports it then this person becomes the new for bullying*" (year 11 girl, boarder)
> "*wasn't severe enough*" (year 10 boy, day student)
> "*because it was not a big deal …*" (year 10 boy, boarder).

These emerging findings were explored further in cycle 2.

Like cycle 1, questions for cycle 2 were decided by the team together. We opted for a paper questionnaire for the students and staff members to complete and we sent emails directly to parents from the school mail base. We received 61 responses from students, 10 from staff and 177 from parents.

In order to explore the questionnaire data further with students, R4U opted for a 'gonzo approach'. This is an ethnographic approach which encourages a merge of participation and observation (Tedlock, 2007), the idea being to "tell it like it is" (Tedlock, 2007: 120). The approach used was one where R4U organised some focus groups and interviews and invited their peers to join. Nobody elected to attend a focus group but we had 9 student volunteers for interview. Students were given the choice to be interviewed by me as the adult researcher or by an R4U member. Although it has been argued that some young people will want to speak to their peers rather than adults in an interview situation, this is not always the case so the option of an adult researcher should be made available (McLaughlin, 2006).

Once cycle 1 and 2 data had been analysed, a pattern began to emerge from the data. It was clear what the student body, parents/carers and school staff viewed as the bullying problems in the school. Students identified repetition, name calling and physical assault as characteristics of 'serious bullying' whereas parents and staff members regarded all bullying as serious but suggested that it is more about perspective:

> "*Some students would consider even the most light-hearted teasing as bullying whereas others can be on the receiving end of a torrent of abuse and not be phased by it. The seriousness of a bullying incident depends entirely on the viewpoint of the victim and bully*" (Teacher).

Students and parents revealed that they were unclear about what to do when a bullying situation arose and suggested that this information be more readily available in the school. Students suggested that bullying happens at their school due to financial issues where students on scholarships are particularly vulnerable. Some students saw the bully as 'having nothing better to do' and some considered bullying being about popularity and fitting in. Finally, students considered 'difference' with regard to accent and tone for example, while others thought bullying happens to students who are considered 'weaker' than others.

Cycle 3

The research team devised a strategy based on the emerging data. This strategy was presented to the vice principal, who agreed to take this forward with regards to the action we had suggested. I returned to the school a year later and much of the action had taken place:

1. *Year 7 induction:*

We proposed involvement of the senior prefect team (sixth form) in the induction of the year 7 students which has been implemented by the school. This enables younger students to recognise older students in school and if the need arises approach them with concerns rather than relying solely on adult support.

2. *'Blossom[1]' rep for each year group*

'Blossom' is the school student support group and representation is from the sixth form and pastoral care staff. We recommended that all year groups should have a representative on *Blossom*. This was rejected by the school due to the belief that younger students should not be exposed to potential child protection concerns and other sensitive issues. Blossom representation now includes students from years 10 to 13 with some visiting years 7 to 9 tutor groups so younger students can voice concerns and raise issues. Previously younger students needed to make contact with *Blossom* which was reported as a deterrent by some students in this study.

3. Encourage students to use email to report bullying incidents

Students, parents/carers and teachers recommended that the option to report bullying anonymously and confidentially should be provided in school. To that end the home page on all school computers display the *Blossom* email address and a 'post box' is displayed in the reception area where students can report concerns anonymously.

R4U made various presentations to the school highlighting the work we had done and promoting the services now available to students should they require help and/or advice on bullying issues.

Conclusion

This paper has focussed on how a group of students at a private day and boarding school worked with an adult researcher to attempt to fill a gap in knowledge. This knowledge gap was both local, with regards to investigating the bullying issues within their school, but also to add to the limited

---

[1] Name of student support group has been changed.

academic debate regarding bullying in private day and boarding schools. More importantly this paper has focussed on the process followed in order to ensure these students had the opportunities to participate in research into an area of importance to them. In a report to the school R4U stated: "*We hope that researchers in the future will take Niamh's example and provide students with their own opportunity to carry out their own research*". This highlights the importance of involving young people in research that is of particular interest to them; it provides them with a sense of ownership over the process and as a result they feel particularly compelled to ensure the recommendations are implemented in the school. In this respect the work of the project continues although the research has ended.

References

Burr, V. (1995) *An Introduction to Social Constructionism.* London: Routledge.

Carlisle, N. and Rofes, E. (2007) 'School Bullying: Do Adult Survivors Perceive Long-Term Effects?', *Traumatology* 13(16) pp.16-26.

Carter, B.B. and Spencer, V.G. (2006) 'The Fear Factor: Bullying and Students with Disabilities', *International Journal of Special Education* 21(1) pp.299–312.

Cheng, Y.Y. Chen, L.M. Ho, H.C. and Cheng , C.L. (2011) 'Definitions of school bullying in Taiwan: A comparison of multiple perspectives', *School Psychology International* 32(3) pp.227-243.

Cowie, J. and Jennifer, D. (2008) *New Perspectives on Bullying.* Berkshire: Open University Press.

Craig, W. Henderson, K. and Murphy, J.G. (2000) 'Prospective Teachers Attitudes Toward Bullying and Victimization', *School Psychology International* 21(1) pp. 5-21.

Cuadrado-Gordillo, I. (2012) 'Repetition, Power Imbalance, and Intentionality: Do These Criteria Conform to Teenagers' Perception of Bullying? A Role-Based Analysis', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 27(10) pp.1889-1910.

Darbyshire, P. MacDougall, C. and Schiller, W. (2005) 'Multiple methods in qualitative research with children: more insights or just more?', *Qualitative Research* 5(4) pp.417-436.

Department for Education (DfE). (2012) *Preventing and tackling bullying: Advice for head teachers, staff and governing bodies.* Available at: http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/p/preventing%20and%20tackling%20bullying%202012.pdf (Accessed: 12th April 2013).

Gergen, K.J. and Gergen, M.M. (2008) 'Social Construction and Research as Action' in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds) 2nd edn *The Sage Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* London: Sage pp.159-171.

House of Commons: Education and Skills Committee. (2007*) Bullying Third Report of Session 2006–07.* London: The Stationery Office Limited.

James, A. (2010) *School Bullying. Research Briefing.* Available at: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/briefings/school_bullying_pdf_wdf73502.pdf (Accessed: 17th April 2013].

Jones, A. (2004) 'Involving Children and Yong People as Researchers' in Fraser, S. Lewis, V. Ding, S. Kellett, M. and Robinson, C. (eds) *Doing Research with Children and Young People*. London: Sage pp.113-130.

Juvonen, J. Graham, S. and Schuster, M.A. (2003) 'Bullying Among Young Adolescents: The strong, the weak and the troubled', *Pediatrics* 112(6) pp.1231 – 1237.

Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (1988) *The Action Research Planner*. 3rd edn. Victoria: Deakin University Press.

Kidd, S.A. and Kral, M.J. (2005) 'Practicing Participatory Action Research', *Journal of Counselling Psychology* 52(2) pp.187-195.

King, N. and Horrocks, C. (2010) *Interviews in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Lee, C. (2006) 'Exploring teachers' definitions of bullying', *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* 11(1) pp. 61-75.

Lines, D. (1999) 'Secondary Pupils' Experiences of Name-calling Behaviour', *Pastoral Care* (March) pp. 23-31.

McLaughlin, H. (2006) 'Involving Young Service Users as Co-Researchers: Possibilities, Benefits and Costs', *British Journal of Social Work* 36 pp.1395–1410.

Menesini, E. Fonzi, A. and Smith, P.K.(2002) 'Attribution of meanings to terms related to bullying: A comparison between teacher's and pupil's perspectives in Italy', *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 17(4) pp.393-406.

Morgan, R. (2004) *Being a boarder: A Survey of Boarders' and Parents' Views on Boarding Schools*. Office of the Children's Rights Director Newcastle upon Tyne: Commission for Social Care Inspection.

Morrison, B. (2002) 'Bullying and Victimisation in schools: A restorative justice approach', *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* 219 Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

Naylor, P. Cowie, H. Cossin, F. de Bettencourt, R. and Lemme, F. (2006) 'Teachers' and Pupils' Definitions of Bullying', *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 76 pp.553-576.

National Children's Bureau (NCB).(2004) 'Making schools safer using effective anti-bullying strategies', *Spotlight briefing* November London: NCB.

Neddam, F. (2004) 'Constructing masculinities under Thomas Arnold of Rugby (1828-1842): gender, educational policy and school life in an early-Victorian public school', *Gender and Education* 16(3) pp. 303-326.

O'Brien, N. (2009) 'Secondary school teachers' and pupils' definitions of bullying in the UK: a systematic review', *Evidence & Policy* 5(4) pp.399-426.

O'Brien, N. and Moules, T. (2013) 'Not sticks and stones but tweets and texts: findings from a national cyberbullying project', *Pastoral Care in Education* 31(1) pp.53-65.

Office For Standards in Education (OFSTED). (2003) *Bullying: effective action in secondary schools.* London: OFSTED.

Oliver, C. and Candappa, M. (2003) *Tackling Bullying: Listening to the views of children and young people.* London: Thomas Coram Research Unit.

Olweus, D. (1995) 'Bullying or Peer Abuse at School: Facts and Intervention', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 4(6) pp.196 – 200.

Poynting, S. and Donaldson, M. (2005) 'Snakes and Leaders: Hegemonic Masculinity in Ruling-Class Boys' Boarding Schools', *Men and Masculinities* 7 pp.325-346.

Rigby, K. (2000) 'Effects of peer victimization in schools and perceived social support on adolescent well-being', *Journal of Adolescence* 23 pp.57-68.

Sawyer, J.L. Mishna, F. Pepler, D. and Wiener, J. (2011) 'The missing voice: Parents' perspectives of bullying', *Children and Youth Services Review* 33 pp. 1795–1803.

Schaverien, J. (2004) 'Boarding school: the trauma of the 'privileged' child', *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 49 pp.683-705.

Smith, P.K. (1999) 'England and Wales' in Smith, P.K. Morita, Y. Junger-Tas, J. Olweus, D. Catalano, R. and Slee, P. (eds) *The Nature of School Bullying: A Cross National Perspective*. London: Routledge, pp. 68-90.

Smith, P. K. and Morita, Y. (1999) 'Introduction' in Smith, P.K. Morita, Y. Junger-Tas, J. Olweus, D. Catalano, R. and Slee, P. (eds) *The Nature of School Bullying: A Cross National Perspective*. London: Routledge, pp.1-4.

Tarapdar, S. and Kellett, M. (2011) *Young People's Voices on Cyberbullying: What can age comparisons tell us?.* London: The Diana Award and The Children's Research Centre: The Open University.

Tedlock, B. (2007) 'Ethnographic Evocations' in Strecker, I. and Marcus, V. (eds) *Astonishment and Evocation.* Volume 2 [e-book] pp.118-136.

Thompson, F. and Smith, P.K. (2012) *Anti-bullying strategies in schools – What is done and what works.* Available at: http://www.bullyingandcyber.net/media/cms_page_media/55/Thompson-Smith2.pdf (Accessed 3rd April 2013).

Thomson, P. and Gunter, H. (2008) 'Researching Bullying with students: a lens on everyday life in an innovative school', *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 12(2) pp.185-200.

Veale, A. (2005) 'Creative Methodologies in Participatory Research with Children' in Greene, S. and Hogan, D. (eds) *Researching children's experience: Approaches and Methods*. London: Sage pp.253 - 272.

Vreeman, R.C. and Carroll, A.E. (2007) 'A Systematic Review of School-Based Interventions to Prevent Bullying', *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 161 pp.78-88.